

THE RAT

The chief of detectives sat alone in Mulberry street. From behind the green swinging door which led from his private office to the assembly room and the Rogues' Gallery he could hear a mumble of voices while the detective sergeants talked over the crooks who had been "stood up" at roll call for identification and future remembering. These systems of monikers at police headquarters is primary, but undeniably effective.

He could even distinguish the click of the brass catches as some one searching through the "gallery" unclosed panel after panel of the hinged wall photograph album. The chief's brows were contracted and he pulled at his beard. He had not been head of the Central office for many months, and besides, he was alone and might allow himself a momentary relaxation of features forbidden him in the presence of his subordinates, who must never be impressed with an official "front."

It was annoying—worse than annoying. It was even dangerous. The murder was a week old, and already the newspapers were to full cry over the inefficiency of the department. He knew that the detective bureau was expected to "make good." And "making good" meant making arrests. If the situation had not been desperate one he would not have ordered the breaking in of The Rat the night before. Warren and Murphy had taken him in McTurk's, with the Sing Sing chalk still in his face. He had not been six weeks, and he was very drunk.

The Rat had been taken, and the chief of detectives had sent across the street to say that reporters might call at four and be told how the mystery had been solved. He sighed heavily as he reflected, for the detective bureau was more to be desired than a pincut. And he had been in uniform long enough to relish the privilege of wearing citizens' clothes. To say nothing of having his picture printed in the newspapers a great many times, with astute remarks upon crime which he frequently distributed, neatly typewritten.

He looked at his watch. It was half after three. Then he leaned forward in his chair and touched an electric desk button. A uniformed sergeant responded.

The chief nodded. "Harry," he said, "bring in The Rat."

The green door opened and closed, and opened again as The Rat entered. He slouched half way across the room, and, turning, glared at the chief, who said "Good morning" affably enough and pointed to a chair placed so that the light from the courtyard would strike the face of its occupant fairly.

His appearance did not belie his title—The Rat. He was a sharp featured, stunted creature, with thin hair that grew down upon his neck and clustered about his eyes, which were set straining close together. His mouth lacked the curve of expression, without which no mouth is human; and the upper lip was so short that it gave one the impression of being continually drawn back in an ugly sneer. Not a pleasant spectacle to dwell upon was The Rat.

The chief looked at him hungrily. "If I could only make him stand for it," he thought. "It would be the prettiest sort of a story. He looks the part. The papers would print diagrams of his head, and women reporters to write about inherited criminal instincts. It would square me for six months. This is what the Rat thought. What he said was "So you're come back to us, eh?"

The Rat snarled. "Cut that out," said the chief, placently. "You're safer now. We're only holding you till you tell us where you were Tuesday night. That's all. They found 'Dutch' Gallagher over on Chrystie street early Wednesday morning. There was a knife and a red handkerchief. Rat. These? With a quick movement the chief whipped the knife and handkerchief from the top drawer of his desk and held them towards the prisoner. But The Rat was emotionless. He looked at the detective and at the objects held in his hand. There was no surprise or fright, only hatred in his gaze.

The chief leaned over the desk. His voice was soft and almost appealing. "It cannot turn your thoughts that we were well nigh locked, and he touched The Rat's arm. "It's silk," he murmured. "Red silk with a blood-stain."

The prisoner swore again comprehensively. "I ain't afraid of your third degree," he snarled. "Bring it along. I know it's coming. They told me all about it up the river. There's a greenblood man up there in the 36 named Burke. He works in the barge house because he ain't no good on the stone piles. He's got one side of his face stove in, and those fingers twisted together where two of your wardmen giv him the liten turn."

"Break the news to mother. Just tell her that I love her. Just say to her I—"

The Rat was musing to himself and smiling as he were remembering something pleasant. His lips were curled back to the bums, and his enjoyment was not edifying, and when his gaze wandered past that of the chief, the head of the detective bureau knew that it penetrated the gray cartridge paper of the wall behind him, and knew, too, that The Rat's mood was far flung. The man was still jerking his head up and down with the staccato tempo of the piano.

"Comey. Comey and two camp-steeds on the dock by the dago bidders both ways," he muttered. He said it aloud, but it was as if he were talking to himself. The chief's hand moved toward the electric push-button and then paused irresolute. The purring notes of the street piano trickled like cool water through the room cloisters.

"Comey in the summertime," repeated The Rat vacuously. "It's God's own country. Comey Fr' me of a Sunday afternoon wif the sunshine and the tulips jomf. 'S the limit, what?" off swelled out his sparrow chest proudly toward the playing. "'S the limit," he chuckled.

"Wit a shme and a new celluloid rim and a nickel stogie in yer transom, ya fer ya money, and yet it. Say, I've danced rings round the other spiders in Stauch's wit' Mane."

The Rat's voice softened almost imperceptibly, but the chief caught the change and gripped the sides of his chair, breathing irregularly as if afraid to break the spell.

"There's just one girl in this world for me," One girl has my sym-pa-thee. She's not so very pretty, nor yet of high degree,

But there's just one girl in this world for me!"

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I kept hammerin' away on a Sing Sing stone pile, thinkin' he was lookin' after her. Why, I believed him. I thought he was on the square. It was stripes and the stone pile fr me, and fr him the Bowery of a Saturday night wit' the easy come-ons ready waitin' on the pavement.

"He come ter see me in the Tomb before he took me up. 'Till look after Mama, s'elp me,' he said. And wit' that I heard the deputies in the smokin' car and give up me pedigree in the warden's office like the real thing. I thought he was the Dutch" was right. The calendar ain't turn'd like no roulette wheel up at Sing Sing. But it went a heap faster wit' the letters from 'Luten' who give Mama's love at the end. Mama didn't write. She wasn't no scholar. And how I know that Dutch" was lyin'?

The Rat halted waveringly. But the planches sent him plumb on. They took me good conduct time off and I got my ticket of leave. And I was fr the man route wit' a new suit of paper clothes and the stonepile cushion in 'em. I hadn't lit 'em know I was comin'. I wanted to surprise Mama. It was dark when I got ter Cannon street. I meets Sweeney, the janitor, on the top of the stoop, after rushin' the can. 'Fifth floor?' I asks, thinkin' maybe Mama had moved. Sweeney eyes me and says, 'Wot're you handin' me?' Mama Gilligan, you mutt, I says, and pushin' past him made as if to go upstairs.

"Sweeney crossed himself, and wit' that I known there was somethin' gone wrong. It struck me cold before he spoke, and I never felt warm since—but once. The Rat's yellow teeth rasped against one another like a terrier worrying a bone. He went on thickly:

" Didn't they put you next?" says Sweeney. Next ter what? I asks. 'Mame Gilligan's dead in Believee these six months,' he says."

The Rat put one hand to his head painfully. "When Sweeney says that somethin' bustin' in here," he said. "I've been a bit in me nut ever since, but not too much gone fr' diein' 'Dutch' Gallagher. Why, a dog won't have treated Mama the way he'd done it. She'd been starved. The ambulance doctor what come when Sweeney found her senseless in the hall said she hadn't been eatin' enough fr' weeks. 'Dutch' had left her. She'd hooked everything she had except the ring I'd bought her. They buried her wit' that on. He'd been writin' to me and sendin' me Mama's love after she was dead, and he knowed it. I'd been doin' the time for both of us, and he'd let Mama starve."

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